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Developments in Indochina

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Developments in Indochina

This publication is prepared by the Far East Division, Office of Current Intelligence, with occasional contributions from other offices within the Directorate of Intelligence. Comments and queries are welcome. They should be directed to the authors of the individual articles.

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The South Vietnamese have not been entirely successful in containing Communist forces near Hue, and the commander in the northern provinces is realigning his forces to better protect the city and to keep the Communists out of the well-populated lowlands. The Lower House failed to override Senate amendments to the Senate elections bill. President Thieu will now have to adjust the bill himself to restore the provisions favoring his Democracy Party.

NORTH VIETNAM 3

Hanoi is giving wide play to congressional opposition to the bombing of Cambodia and to Watergate and related developments, but is not confident that developments in the US substantially alter Communist options in Indochina.

CAMBODIA. 4

The Vietnamese presence in Cambodia is concentrated near the South Vietnamese border--most of the 5,000 combat troops are just opposite MR-4 in South Vietnam, and the 28,000 rear service personnel manning the Ho Chi Minh supply trails are in northeastern Cambodia.

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The number-two Communist is on a grand
tour of Communist capitals to secure
some new aid commitments and to polish
the image of an independent Pathet Lao.

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SOUTH VIETNAM

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The Situation Around Hue

The foothills west and south of Hue continue to be the scene of fairly steady combat activity. Fighting here, which has been going on for several months, is not the typical scramble for additional land and people that has characterized the fighting elsewhere in the country since the cease-fire. In the Hue area, both sides have been parrying with artillery duels and scattered ground probes.

Since shortly after the cease-fire, one regiment of the South Vietnamese 1st Division has been trying to establish new positions well to the west of the city on the high ground beyond the Bo River in an effort to block Communist access to the lowlands. They have been largely unsuccessful, and Communist forces have somewhat improved their access to the lowlands. The 1st Division unit is to be relieved by another 1st Division regiment for the same mission; if it fails, the South Vietnamese commanders may consider bringing in part of the Airborne Division to help.

The commanding general of the five northern provinces, Ngo Quang Truong, recently made a new assessment of Communist military intentions in the northern two provinces and now feels that a general realignment of his forces would be helpful. General Truong believes that the Communists will not attack across the Marine and Airborne divisions' northern lines, but may move at some point against the more vulnerable city of Hue or its environs. General Truong's proposed realignment would expand the area of the Marine Division's responsibility in Quang Tri Province, make the Airborne Division responsible for the area north of Hue to the Quang Tri Province border, and move the 1st Division to the south of Hue.

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Troop relocations, however, will not solve some of the other weaknesses of government forces in the area.

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In addition to continuing military pressure on the Hue coastal sector, the Communists have been constructing new roads leading down from the mountains west of Hue and moving large amounts of equipment and supplies from secure storage areas in the A Shau Valley. Although the Communists appear to have much of the initiative in this area, they are moving at a deliberate pace seemingly designed to improve their positions on the high ground overlooking the city. As they complete their resupply networks and their reinforcing, they may increase their nibbling efforts in the lowlands and possibly try to interdict Route 1, thus greatly complicating the government military position in the two northern provinces.

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Senate Election Bill

The ground rules of the Senate election next August apparently now depend on whatever personal action President Thieu takes. Thieu's supporters in the Lower House last week tried but failed to restore provisions--eliminated earlier by the Senate--which had given the President's Democracy Party a special edge. Thieu's only constitutional recourse now is to make amendments of his own, which he must do before the end of next week.

If Thieu decides to restore the original version of the bill, he probably will get his way because the National Assembly has rarely rejected presidential amendments. This would probably mean that only the Democracy Party would be able to run senatorial candidates. Thieu has not yet indicated what he will do.

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NORTH VIETNAM

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Hanoi on the Domestic US Situation [REDACTED]

The North Vietnamese apparently believe the fall-out from current developments in the US will be positive for them. After a slow start, Hanoi's media are covering the Watergate affair and its various ramifications in considerable detail. They have reduced the authoritativeness of their treatment by attributing most interpretative comment to Western press agencies, but the message still comes through that they think Washington's flexibility has been limited. A Radio Hanoi broadcast on the eve of Dr. Kissinger's departure for Paris, for example, claimed the Western press was saying Kissinger's credibility had been challenged by the disclosures that he had access to wiretapping records. Whatever stock the North Vietnamese put in this line of reasoning, they apparently see some value in calling the US side's negotiating strength into question. Hanoi is also giving full play to US congressional efforts to force the curtailment of the US bombing in Cambodia.

There is as yet no good evidence that Hanoi intends to adjust its strategy in Indochina on this account, and the North Vietnamese themselves may not have decided yet. They probably do believe that whatever the constraints on US military action up to now, Washington will be more tightly limited in the future. But they may not feel confident that this substantially enlarges their options. [REDACTED]

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CAMBODIA

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The Vietnamese Connection

There is little hard evidence that any regular Vietnamese Communist infantry units are participating in the current fighting in Cambodia. Vietnamese Communist combat strength in Cambodia is at its lowest level--an estimated 5,000 troops--since the Communists began operations there in 1970. Most of these forces are situated along the border of South Vietnam's Military Region 4. It is possible, however, that some Vietnamese may be assisting Khmer Communist units operating against Cambodian Army positions in the remote border areas of Takeo and Kampot provinces. Others probably serve as advisers to Khmer Communist units.

An estimated 28,400 Vietnamese Communist administrative services personnel are also in Cambodia, primarily engaged in defending and manning the logistic network that supports Communist forces in South Vietnam. This logistic activity is centered in north-east Cambodia in areas bordering South Vietnam. The Khmer Communists are dependent on the Vietnamese for almost all of their military equipment.

Some Vietnamese Communist personnel may have been involved in recent enemy actions in the Phnom Penh area. According to the US defense attache, elements of the North Vietnamese 367th Sapper Group probably were responsible for the shellings of Poch-entong air base in late April. Since then, however, at least part of this unit has pulled away from the capital region and is now near Kompong Cham city.

A Khmer Communist prisoner

has told Cambodian Army interrogators that Vietnamese Communist forces participated in the fighting on the east bank of the Mekong River near Phnom Penh in late April. The

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[redacted]

prisoner claimed that his battalion was ordered to support the Vietnamese troops, and that the combined force was beaten off by government units aided by air strikes. He also stated that the withdrawing Communist force was hit by heavy air strikes that inflicted substantial casualties on the Vietnamese.

The prisoner said that before each combat mission, the Vietnamese provided his unit with enough ammunition for the operation. Although there were no Vietnamese in his battalion, it was commanded by a Cambodian who apparently had been trained in North Vietnam. The battalion had one radio to contact the North Vietnamese unit that controlled it. Finally, the prisoner claimed that most of the troops in his battalion were not pro-Sihanouk, and that most of them liked the Vietnamese because they spoke Cambodian and endured many hardships in helping the Khmer Communists.

The prisoner was either unwilling or unable to identify the Vietnamese Communist units associated with his battalion. There is no evidence to substantiate his claim that Vietnamese Communist troops are currently involved in the fighting near Phnom Penh.

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LAOS

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Lao Communists on Grand Tour

For more than a month now, the number two Lao Communist, Nouhak Phoumsavan, and a delegation of lesser functionaries have been on an international junket. This is Nouhak's third tour abroad within a year. Stops so far include Hanoi, Peking, Pyongyang, East Berlin, Moscow, and Havana. Other Communist capitals may be on Nouhak's itinerary, which has not been made public.

Although the principal purpose of the trip appears to be to obtain military and economic assistance, the publicity given the visits and host country statements of support serve to enhance the image of the Lao Communists as an "independent" political movement. This is an important consideration to Lao Communist leaders as they prepare for the formation of a coalition government headed by Souvanna Phouma--who himself relies heavily on international backing.

The trip also has given Nouhak a chance to take direct readings on Chinese and Soviet attitudes toward Laos and the rest of Indochina. This is not to say that Nouhak is dealing behind Hanoi's back. The Lao Communist leadership has had close relations with the North Vietnamese for over thirty years and will remain dependent on Hanoi's support. But it is reasonable to expect Nouhak to elicit confirmation of whatever Hanoi has been telling Sam Neua about the views and intentions of other Communist powers.

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